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ABSTRACT

From 1950 to 1970, the shift from agriculture to industry dominated Ashe County, North Carolina, isolated on the Blue Ridge by rugged terrain and severe weather. Rural farm population declined by 2/3 but rural non-farm population tripled. Many new industries helped shift the bulk of the work force to industry. In 1950, 45% of the work force farmed full time and only 17% had industrial jobs. By 1970 just 9% farmed full time; 54% were employed by industries. The main agricultural products shifted to feeder steers, tobacco, and Christmas trees, so the typical farm family could seek additional employment. Median family income increased but per capita income remained low. Attracting and supporting industry became the focus of optimistic leaders who in 1977 listed as priorities for the county: economic diversification; improvement of educational facilities and opportunities; improved roads; and improved health, social, and public services. Recent developments, such as the Ashe County airport, a new hospital, a new county library, and plans for an industrial park, reflected this goal. The enthusiastic leadership, no longer fiercely controlled by a few local families but rather by a more progressive mixture of business and government people, liked the attitudes and relationships of residents, the climate, and the quality of life in Ashe County. (SB)

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A Profile of Ashe County, North Carolina

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S-120 Technical Committee
Social Organization for Development
of Low-Income Rural Counties

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Profile - Objectives A and B

Ashe County
North Carolina

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

County Inception

The first inhabitants of Ashe County were the Cherokees, Shawnees, and Creeks. In 1752, the first white men entered this section of the Appalachian Mountains when a band of Moravians led by Bishop Spangenburg came to Ashe in search of a site for a permanent settlement. The Moravians, however, did not remain in this area.

In 1771, the first permanent settlers came to Ashe County from Virginia and built cabins near Helton Creek. The leader of this band of pioneers had visited the area on a hunting trip in 1770.

Ashe County was originally part of Anson County. Later it was included with Rowan, then Surry, and finally Wilkes. The North Carolina General Assembly, in 1799, created Ashe from the area of Wilkes County that existed atop the Blue Ridge. The county was named in honor of Samuel Ashe, a Revolutionary war patriot and governor of North Carolina. The county seat was established in 1803 as Jeffersonton; however, in 1825, the General Assembly shortened the name to Jefferson. The present boundaries of Ashe County were fixed in 1849. It includes an area of 427 square miles.

Major Changes Since Creation

Ashe County was originally referred to as the Lost Province. However, the name no longer adequately describes the county for Ashe has experienced many changes since its inception.

During the 1800's a trip to adjacent Wilkes County would take the typical Ashe County farmer several days by wagon over rugged mountain terrain.

Today with a fairly adequate road system county residents have relatively easy access to Virginia, Tennessee, and the neighboring North Carolina counties. Also, the county has moved from a total agricultural economy to a more diverse economy in which a large proportion of the labor force is employed by industry.

The county's location and topography have caused the area to be relatively isolated. For example, the county citizens were hardly involved in the Civil War except for a small number of men who joined the South's military forces.

The land and weather have created many hardships, therefore the individual families often found it necessary to rely on neighbors for help and assistance. Down through the generations, Ashe County's severe weather and rugged terrain have led to a strong interdependency of families and neighbors. This has resulted in strong local ties. The emphasis on community and neighborhood is suggested by the number of post offices and churches that existed in Ashe. For instance, in 1899, the county had 68 post offices which allowed practically every community to remain a separate unit. Then each individual community would normally be centered around the local church. Even in 1976, Ashe County had one church for every 148 people, although the number of post offices has decreased to five.

Topography and Geography

In an account of the first recorded visit to Ashe County, the winter weather was a topic of concern. Bishop Spangenburg and his men entered Ashe in December and experienced a severe winter storm. In his diary the Bishop recorded these desperate words "...water froze by the fire. Then our men lost heart!"

The average year-round temperature is 53 degrees, with an average of 32 degrees in January, and 68 degrees in July. The county annually receives an average of 48 inches of rain and 14 inches of snow. Most residents of the county would probably describe the climate as ideal. However, the growing season is much shorter than in neighboring Wilkes County. For example, the crops that require transplanting are often started in Wilkes and transferred to Ashe after the danger of frost has passed.

Ashe County has a total land area of 427 square miles. The mean elevation of the county is 3,025 feet above sea level. Forest land accounts for 53 percent of the county. Another 21 percent of the county's land is set aside for pasture. An additional 18 percent is used for cropland. Only four percent of the county can be classified as urban or built-up.

Overall, the percentage of land involved in agricultural production is declining. For instance, in 1950, 80 percent of the county's land was in farms. By 1969, the percentage dropped to 63. This nine year period was accompanied by a 22 percent decrease of land in farm production. During a similar time span, the urban and built-up land increased by 185 percent.

Demographic Sketch

Ashe County experienced a gradual decline in population from 1950 to 1970 (Table 1). Many of the county leaders attribute the decrease to a lack of employment opportunities. Almost half of the high school graduates go on to college, but few return to Ashe, since only a small number of jobs in agriculture and industry require extensive training. The population estimates for 1970 to 1975 show a net increase of 2.7 percent. This is the first positive change Ashe County has experienced in population since before 1940.

The county has three incorporated towns, each with a population of less than 1,000. The county's rural farm population has drastically declined since 1950. The present rural farm population is less than one-third of the 1950 farm population. However, from 1950 to 1970 the rural nonfarm population has tripled (Table 1).

In 1970, 22 percent of the males and 29 percent of the females, age 25 and over, were high school graduates. The median years of school completed by males in 1950 was 7.1, 7.4 in 1960, and 8.2 in 1970. Females over age 25 had completed 7.3 years of school in 1950, 7.9 in 1960, and 9.3 in 1970 (Table 2).

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS

The Ashe Chamber of Commerce reports that the county before 1950 had six small industrial firms which employed 220 people. By 1971, eight new industries which employed 2350 additional people were established. Employment in industry increased by 53 percent from 1960 to 1970. The largest employment change came in the service area which has increased by 178 percent (Table 3).

In 1977, 21 county positional leaders and influentials were asked to list some of the most significant developments affecting Ashe since 1975. These leaders suggested the following:

Development	Number of Mentions (N=21)
Ashe county airport	10
New industrial firms	6
Production of Christmas trees	5
Plans for an industrial park	4
Termination of rail service	3
Failure of the New River Dam Project	3

Development	Number of Mentions (N=21)
Agricultural Production improved (cattle, tobacco, apples)	3
Decline of widespread agriculture	2
Failure of the water bond	2
Recreation area on the New River	1

Ashe has been very active in recruiting industry during the 1970's. For example, an airport has been developed. The airport which began limited operations in 1977 has been used almost on a daily basis by the local industries.

The County Commission and Chamber of Commerce in 1972 developed a plan for a county-wide water system. The proposed system would first serve the towns of Jefferson and West Jefferson and then be extended to surrounding communities on demand. The county leaders saw this system as a necessary element to facilitate the county's industrial development. The county voted in 1975 to reject the proposed water system. The opponents of the project argued that the system would benefit only the towns, while the entire county would pay for the system.

A third major attempt at economic development is currently in the planning stages. The county, in 1978, applied to the Economic Development Administration for funds to implement the study and site selection phase for an industrial park. The county plans include a 50 acre site which would allow the county to recruit several industries.

Since 1950, Ashe County has experienced some significant developments. Table 4 lists major developments from 1955-1977. The greatest gains have occurred with industrial employment. The county also acquired during the 1970's a new hospital, an airport, and a new county library.

ECONOMIC PROFILE

Ashe County has primarily relied on agriculture for its main source of income. The county is well known for its quality burley tobacco, Christmas trees, and feeder steers. The typical farm family no longer raises several cash crops. This allows the family members to seek other jobs, yet have enough spare time to raise cattle or tend a cash crop such as Christmas trees. In 1950, 45 percent of the work force was involved in full time farming, but by 1970, only 9 percent of the work force farmed full time. The trend has been toward manufacturing. For instance, in 1950, only 17 percent of the labor force had industrial jobs. Industrial employment increased to 54 percent in 1970 (Table 7). Table 5 lists the present county industries and number employed in 1978. Table 7 includes the proportion of the work force by occupational group for 1950, 1960, 1970. Table 7 shows that the bulk of the work force has shifted from farming to industry.

Although Ashe has acquired several industries since 1950, not all the local citizens are able to work in the county. The Employment Security Commission indicates that over 1,250 individuals leave the county daily to work elsewhere. The unemployment figure for Ashe has averaged about 5.5 percent during the winter months for the last several years and about 3.0 percent during the spring and summer.

Along with industrial growth, the median family income has increased considerably. The median family income in 1950 was $981; $2,276 in 1960; and $5,241 in 1970. The county's per capita personal income ranked 91st out of the state's 100 counties in 1975. Also in 1970, 27.8 percent of the families in Ashe had an income less than the poverty level. This is compared to 16.3 percent for all families in the state.

LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE COUNTY AT PRESENT

During the summer of 1977, 38 influential leaders in Ashe County were interviewed concerning their involvement in various development events and their development contacts with other individuals. These interviews also included questions on the respondent's perception of the county.

Table 8 gives the five basic response categories dealing with what the respondents liked best about Ashe County. The most frequently mentioned category is entitled "relationships and attitudes." A large number of the responses in this category deal with the people of Ashe County, e.g., the "people are generous and cooperative," "people are independent and honest," "Ashe County people care for one another," etc.

The second category deals with geography and climate. Many respondents mentioned the "ideal climate" with its "very distinct seasons." Other respondents mentioned the "beautiful mountain scenery" and "opportunities for outdoor recreation."

The third category is the general "quality of life." Typical responses in this area include the "rural setting and atmosphere," "easy life style," and the county is "a good place to raise a family in peace."

A majority of the 38 respondents mentioned economics as the greatest problem currently facing the county. Table 9 lists the response categories for the needs and problems of Ashe County as perceived by the respondents. Many of the responses in the economic area deal with industrial expansion and diversification. Although Ashe has experienced a great deal of industrial growth since 1950, there is still a need to add jobs and stimulate growth to enable the county to keep pace with the nation.

The second most important need is education. Many respondents indicated that the county needed to improve the existing school facilities and curriculum.

Some of the respondents suggested that the county should provide "more extensive vocational training for the students who desire not to go to college."

A third need area concerns transportation. The main response in this category deals with the need to improve the road system in Ashe County. Some respondents indicate that "with improved roads, the county has a much better chance in attracting industry."

The fourth area of concern deals with community services, e.g., health, social and public services. The services offered by the county are important in an industry's decision to locate in the county.

The Leadership Structure

Around the turn of the century, power was vested in the hands of only a few families in Ashe County. These families remained in control of county affairs until mid-century. Prior to the 1950's only furniture industries were located in the county, at least one such industry was owned by a very prominent family. This family evidently was quite successful in keeping other industries out of the county. This provided a ready and cheap labor supply. However, things began to change when the first nonlocally owned industry started operations in the county.

Today, influence in county affairs is no longer concentrated in any family or selected few individuals. However, the political leadership in the county is sharply divided along party lines. The ratio of Democrats to Republicans is roughly 2 to 1. Therefore, this easily allows one party to maintain control over the various elected offices. The situation does not, however, stifle political opposition.

Some of the respondents did mention the political area in conjunction with county needs and problems. One such response was a plea for more "bipartisan contact." Another explained that the "county government has settled into a pattern of party affiliation and many qualified people refuse to get involved."

The S-120 interviewers sought information on both general development areas and specific issues. The general area of economic development can be seen as representative of the overall county structure, especially since the county is oriented toward growth and development.

The respondents (N=38) were asked to name and rank the three most important individuals in the area of economic development. The respondent could name and rank three individuals with a rank of one being the most important, two being the second most important, and three being the third most important. The rank scores were inverted and summed for a summary rank score, e.g., a rank of one received a score of three, a rank of two was scored as a two, and rank three scored as one.

The summary rank score is used as a measure of individual influence as perceived by the respondents. The business and economic sector had the largest number of individuals ranked among the top ten. Six individuals are involved with the business sector, e.g., three of these own and operate business based in the county, the other three individuals manage nonlocal based firms. The county government sector is represented by three individuals. Finally, the Chamber of Commerce is included with one member.

The director of a nonlocal firm and the county manager are tied for the highest rank score in economic development. The third spot is occupied by the editor-publisher of the local newspaper. The fourth spot goes to

a director of area development for a firm which is located outside the county. This individual has important contacts concerning new industry. The fifth, sixth, and seventh spots are all occupied by local businessmen. The eighth spot is held by the director of the County Chamber of Commerce and two County Commissioners.

These leaders plus many others are concerned with the development of the county. This interest is manifested in the recent efforts to develop the airport, a county water system, and industrial park. Not all of these developments have occurred as planned. However, this has not discouraged the enthusiasm and optimism of the people in Ashe County as they seek development and a higher standard of living.

Table 1. Population Change for Ashe County, 1950-1970.

	1950	1960	% Change 1950-60	1970	% Change 1960-70
White	21,599	19,569	- 9.4	19,346	-1.14
Nonwhite	279	199	-28.67	225	13.06
Total	21,878	19,768	- 9.64	19,571	-1.00
Total Urban	-	-		-	-
Total Rural Farm	17,678	9,845	-44.31	6,713	-31.81
Total RNF	4,200	9,923	136.3	12,858	29.58

Table 2. Ashe County and North Carolina: Median School Years Completed by Males and Females Age 25 and Over, for 1950, 1960, and 1970.

	Males			Females		
	1950	1960	1970	1950	1960	1970
Ashe County	7.1	7.4	8.2	7.3	7.9	9.3
North Carolina	7.6	8.5	10.3	8.2	9.5	10.8

Table 3. Ashe County: Percent Change in Major Employment Categories, 1960-1970.

Employment Categories	Percent Increase 1960-1970	
	Ashe	N. C.
Manufacturing	52.7	40.8
Contract Construction	106.2	53.0
Transportation Utilities	82.5	57.2
Wholesale and Retail Trade	45.8	52.1
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	107.4	73.0
Services	177.8	80.2

Table 4. Ashe County: Major Developments from 1956 - 1978.

Development	Year
P. H. Hanes plant established in county	1957
Ore knob copper mine in full operation	1957
Sprague Electric and P. H. Hanes expand operation	1959
Weaver Manufacturing established (produces furniture parts)	1961
Ore knob mine is sold (no longer in operation)	1962
Thomasville Furniture bought a local plant	1964
Ashe County Chamber of Commerce is organized	1965
Two motels are established	1965
Greensboro Manufacturing is established (produces ladies' garments)	1966
Industrial Plastics is established	1966
County applied for funds for the airport	1967
Jefferson Wood Products expands operations	1968
Southern Services established (produces light switches)	1969
Ashe Memorial Hospital is completed	1971
Chamber of Commerce plans the County-wide water system	1972
Ashe Park construction began	1973
Ashe Airport is under construction	1974
New County library is under construction	1975
Ashe Cheese bought the local Kraft plant	1975
Water bond is defeated	1975
Jefferson Apparel begins operation	1976
Ashe Airport open for daylight operation	1977
Airport runway lights and beacon installed	1978

Table 5. Ashe County: Major Industrial Firms, 1978.

Name of Company	Employees
Blue Ridge Lumber	60
Hanes, Inc.	414
Jefferson Wood Products	110
Knox Knitting Company	12
Ashe County Cheese, Inc.	34
Penny Manufacturing Company	51
Phenix Chair Company	625
Southern Services, Inc.	37[illegible]
Sprague Electric Company	850
Weaver Manufacturing Company	70
Buffalo Frame Company	15
Jefferson Apparel	500
Total	3,116

Table 6. Ashe County and North Carolina: Median Family Income for 1950, 1960, and 1970, with percent of change 1950-1960 and 1960-1970, and percent of all families under the poverty level in 1970.

	1950	1960	% Change 1950-60	1970	% Change 1960-70	% of Families Under the Poverty Level 1970
Ashe County	981	2,296	+134.0	5,241	+128.3	27.8
North Carolina	1,293	3,956	+205.0	7,774	+ 96.5	16.3

Table 7. Ashe County: Major Occupational Groups With Proportion of Work Force by Occupational Group for 1950, 1960 and 1970.

Occupational Groups	1950	1960	1970
Professional technical and kindred workers	.048	.056	.062
Farmers, farm managers	.458	.234	.088
Managers, officials	.055	.058	.052
Clerical and kindred workers	.021	.045	.068
Sales workers	.034	.033	.037
Craftsmen, foremen	.075	.085	.152
Operatives	.095	.289	.387
Private household workers	.013	.030	.013
Farm laborers	.111	.082	.028
Laborers	.061	.049	.066
Service workers	.025	.041	.049
	.999	1.00	1.00

Table 8. Ashe County: What Respondents Liked Best About the County (S-120 Project).

Rank		Number of Mentions (N=38)
1	Relationships and attitudes	42
2	Geography	39
3	Quality of Life	24
4	Area and family ties	11
5	Economic	5

Table 9. Ashe County: Need Areas for the County (S-120 Project).

Rank		Number of Mentions (N=38)
1	Economic aspects	39
2	Educational opportunities and facilities	22
3	Transportation	14
4	Health, Social and Public Services	12
5	Planning and zoning	5
6	Recreation	6
7	Politics and Government	3